News Letter

OF THE

CONFERENCE ON LITERATURE & PSYCHOLOGY OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

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Natura tenacissimi sumus eorum quae pueri percipimus, ut sapor, quo novo vasa imbuuntur, durat. --Seneca

Minutes

The second annual conference on Literature and Psychology met at the Hotel Statler in Detroit, Michigan, on Friday, December 28, 1951 at 11:00 A.M. Roy P. Basler presided, and Leonard F. Manheim acted as secretary. On motion by Dr. Griffin it was unanimously voted that the group continue on a conference basis, that a petition for such conference be filed pursuant to the rules of MLA, that the News-Letter be continued in substantially its present form, adding such notes and articles as may be submitted by members from time to time, and that the secretary be continued as editor with Dr. Nicholes as associate. William J. Griffin of George Peabody College for Teachers at Nashville, Tenn., was duly nominated as chairman for the next year, and Dr. Manheim was re-nominated as secretary. Both elections were unanimously carried, and the chairman was empowered to appoint a Steering Committee as heretofore. [Pursuant to this power the Steering Committee designated consists of Dr. Roy P. Basler of the Abraham Lincoln Association of Springfield, Ill.; Dr. Wayne Burns of the University of Washington at Seattle, Wash.; and Dr. Eleanor L. Nicholes of the Pforzheimer Library at Purchase, N.Y.]

The Secretary asked for volunteers to search the files of some one particular publication so as to add to our running Bibliography references to notes and articles embodying literary research through the use of depth psychology. Several members volunteered their assistance, and the results of their labors will appear in future issues of this News-Letter.

Dr. Griffin then presented to the Conference his paper on "The Use and Abuse of Psychoanalysis in the Study of Literature," the text of which appeared in the last issue of the News-Letter (Vol.I, no's 5-6, pp. 3-20). He represented himself not so much as the devil but as the devil's advocate in pleading for an avoidance of many of the excesses which have marred previous studies in the field, demanding a just balance of psychological technique and literary scholarship. His plea for modesty and restraint in attempting analyses of authors in the light of their writings would, he said, put an end to the school of what he termed "Freudulent" biography.

Comments on Dr. Griffin's paper from Carvel Collins and Arthur Wormhoudt, neither of whom was able to be present at the Conference, were summarized by the secretary and are reprinted in full below. During the general discussion which followed the presentation, it became apparent that members of the group were favorably impressed by the restraint and modesty of Dr. Griffin's treatment of the problem and that some who, perhaps, had come to scoff remained, if not to pray, then to consider seriously the potential values to be found in this field of literary criticism. The Conference adjourned at 12:35.

[Note: Your editors type the stencils for the N-L, with what help they can get during crowded periods. Most of their errors are quite obvious and should be quietly, kindly corrected. These errors, however, should be noted in the paper by Dr. Griffin: page 4, footnote 4: "Myth Revisited" is from Partisan Review; page 15, 6th line from the bottom of page, the word "clear" has been omitted after "sufficiently."]

COMMENTS ON DR. GRIFFIN'S PAPER

By Carvel Collins, Dept. of English, Mass. Institute of Technology

Professor Griffin elucidates important parts of the bibliography of his subject and presents many of the possibilities and pitfalls of the use of psychoanalysis in literary criticism. Unfortunately a paper I must give in a conflicting meeting prevents my taking part in the discussion of his article. I shall merely add emphasis of one or two points.

I believe with him that as students of literature we should re-examine with care how we can use psychology to increase our understanding of poetry and fiction. I think our first error is to overemphasize the so-called psychoanalysis of an author. As literary critics rather than trained analysts we are not competent to do a job of this sort even if we were able to subject the author to the analyst's couch rather than, as is usual, having to examine the distant if not the dead. So, though we should try to learn what we can of an author's personality, using all the tools available, we should keep modest our claims. And, it seems to me, of even more importance -- if that is possible -- we should remember that, unless for some reason we are solely biographers of literary figures, the author interests us far less than the work. So what we can learn of the author is really of no value until we return with it better prepared for a re-examination of his work.

I believe that the most interesting, legitimately occupiable frontier for the literary critic anxious to make the fullest productive use of the tools which psychology gives him is the relation not between the work and its author but between the work and its readers.

For centuries critics have been examining the form of a literary work as it bears on the work's content. And they have assumed that they have been explaining the work's effect on its readers. But they have been aware only of the so-called manifest content. Today we know from many studies, such as Freud's passage on the continuing appeal of Oedipus Rex, that there is in literary works a large and significant latent content. Freud even seems to go almost so far as to say that it is the latent content alone of Oedipus Rex which accounts for its attraction for readers -- that its form is of little importance. But this is to overlook the fact that such a work as Melville's Pierre, with a presumably somewhat similar latent content but markedly inferior form, has little attraction except as a document for the study of its author's personality. Surely the answer is to be found not just in an examination of the latent content of a work of art but in an examination of the form and style and technique of a work in relation to that newly discoverably latent content as well as to the manifest content.

This is an enormous and risky undertaking. So the results will be tentative and slow to appear. But the literary critic interested in employing psychology will, if he chooses this line of investigation, be doing a most legitimate task -- and a task which no one else is going to do: psychoanalysts will be examining individuals, some of them authors; a few psychoanalysts will be examining the latent content of poetry and fiction; literary critics not interested in psychology will be examining, in an antiquated way, the relation between a work's form and its manifest content. I think the literary critic who is interested in psychology should keep the ultimate goal clearly in mind and remember at all times that he is laying the groundwork of a really sophisticated and effective criticism which will for the first time examine the form and total content of a work as that work makes its impact on its readers. This will require becoming involved in all the other activities going on in the application of psychology to literary study, but it will give those activities a focus and a reason for being which as yet all too many of them lack.

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CORRESPONDENCE

The following letters from members comment on the Griffin paper and on the News-Letter of last year. Comments and criticism are always welcome. An important fuction of the N-L is exchange of views.

from Arthur Wormhoudt, Dept. of English, Minnesota State Teachers College, St. Cloud, Minnesota:

Professor Griffin asks who or what does the critic analyse? He rejects the possibility that the critic or scholar analyses the work of literature on the ground that the work is not a psyche to which alone, he assumes, psychological theory applies. This latter assumption I do not believe is justified. Psychological theory may be said to put in meaningful order the processes of psychical experience. Now the symbols which compose a work of literature 'express' (and are produced by) these same psychical processes. The chief difference between psychical processes, literary symbols and psychological theory seems to be the level of abstraction at which each appears. In principle there is no discontinuity between them. If this is the case, there is no reason why psychological theory cannot be used to make sense out of literary symbols as well as psychical processes. What the literary scholar is analysing, then, with the help of theory and fact acquired in psychoanalytical research (not to mention the many other sources of information needed), is the meanings which can be shown to attach to the symbols of the work. These meanings must, consciously or unconsciously, be held in common by the author and the reader--in posse.

At the same time I do not believe, as Professor Griffin seems to, that the literary student can analyse "the motives and meanings of the author". In the first place the evidence which should reveal the state of the author's psyche is just too fragmentary and incomplete. Secondly this is the business of the biographer--not the literary scholar. I also do not believe that the critic or literary scholar can analyse himself. Thorough analysis of the unconscious self (and no other kind is worth the trouble) is only possible with the aid of a trained psychologist. Finally I do not believe that the literary scholar can analyse readers of the work of literature other

than himself. Even if the literary scholar has had some 'couch' experience of psychoanalysis (and it seems to me that this is indispensable for anyone who wants to use or pronounce upon psychoanalytical theories) even so he is not qualified to attempt the psychoanalysis of any other person's mind or reactions.

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from Marya Porter, graduate student at New York University:

I must let you know how much I have appreciated the Newsletter for which you are greatly responsible. The growing bibliography, the practical suggestions incorporated in Mr. Leon Edel's article, the sane and mature approach of Mr. William Griffin to the discussion of the use of psychoanalysis in the study of literature have all helped to make the Newsletters something to be looked forward to. They have the essence of life about them.

May I also take this opportunity to point out to Mr. Griffin that in addition to the value of "some use of knowledge of psychoanalytic theory and practise" in the study of such writers as Joyce, Lawrence, Kafka, and Thomas Mann (page 5, Newsletter #5-6) is the equally necessary value (and valuable necessity) of a critical understanding of these men's philosophies. For it is from their respective philosophic points of view that their varying psychological applications emerge and take shape. Somehow I feel that we have become so completely swallowed up by the jaws of modern psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychotherapy, etc., that we have begun to lose sight of the fact that a specific philosophy buttresses not only all character of psychologies but also all character of experimentation, all character of ideological thinking, in short, all character of creativity.

A NOTE ON THE MIXING OF DISCIPLINES

The following is abstracted from ITEMS, a publication of the Social Science Research Council, 230 Park Avenue, New York City, (Vol.5,No.4, December 1951--pp. 40-42), from an article by John B. Carroll on "The Interdisciplinary Summer Seminar on Linguistics and Psychology":

An interuniversity summer research seminar on linguistics and psychology was held at Cornell University during the period June 18 - August 10, 1951, under the program sponsored by the Council with funds provided by the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation. The purpose of the seminar was to explore the relationships which might exist between the fields of psychology and linguistics and to make recommendations regarding the development of whatever overlapping areas might be found. The senior staff members of the seminar included three linguists, Frederick B. Agard of Cornell University, Stanley S. Newman of the University of New Mexico, and Thomas A. Sebeok of Indiana University; and three psychologists, John B. Carroll of Harvard University, Charles E. Osgood of the University of Illinois, and Richard L. Solomon of Harvard University....

As an example of an area where the results of psycho-linguistic investigations might be employed, the technique of content analysis was cited....The seminar discussed ways in which techniques of content analysis might be improved, for example, by using valid psycholinguistic units and by studying the internal contingencies between units....

In the course of the seminar it became evident to all participants that certain organizational and professional aspects of both linguistics and psychology were detrimental to the sound development of psycholinguistics. The seminar wished to put on record a number of concrete recommendations as to the conditions necessary for freer collaboration between psychologists and linguists. Psychologists and linguists have little tradition of cooperating with each other, and are likely to have serious misconceptions of each other. The members of the seminar thought that further interdisciplinary conferences, symposia, and research projects should be encouraged. Better bibliographical materials in psycholinguistics, as well as means of exchanging information in psychological and linguistic journals, are urgently needed.

The seminar felt that the time is perhaps ripe for greater emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach in undergraduate and graduate courses. If there are to be courses in the psychology of language, they will have to be fair to both linguistics and psychology. Such courses might well be taught jointly by linguists and psychologists....

WORK IN PROGRESS

Virginia Erdman, Minneapolis, Minn.:
"I am working on a study of Henry James from the standpoint of the clinical psychologist, with particular attention to early childhood and family relations, investigating the effect in his fiction, especially in the style and plot structure, of certain neurotic tendencies."

Louis Fraiberg, Wayne University, Detroit, Mich.:
working on dissertation tentatively entitled "Psychoanalytic Ideas in American Literary Criticism.".

Wayne Burns, Asst. Prof., University of Washington, Seattle, Wash. (on leave during this year for work in England):
"Charles Reade: the Making of a Social Romancer" and "Some Famous Victorian Novels: Essays in Revaluation".

Mrs. E. M. Fleissner, Dept. of German, Wells College, Aurora, N.Y.:
"The psychological treatment of the political prisoner in the European world from Stendhal to Koestler".

Leon Edel, Jamaica, New York:
"Biography of Henry James" and "a series of studies in the 'Divided Self' (Hugh Walpole, Oscar Wilde, etc."

Herbert Zittau, Lawrence College of Wisconsin, Appleton, Wisconsin:
"Voyeuristic schema in the thought of T. S. Eliot - Psychoanalytic interpretation of the concept of 'tradition' in Eliot."

Carvel Collins, Mass. Institute of Technology, Boston, Mass.:
"A biographical and critical book on Wm. Faulkner, using - wherever I can, and can profit from it - a psychoanalytic approach."

Walter Sokel, Temple Univ., Philadelphia, Pa.: "The Concept of the Artist in Expressionist Literature (German)."

Elizabeth Snyder, Temple University: "A Study of Coleridge and Kubla Khan" and "A close study of Hopkins' Wreck of the Deutschland, and perhaps other poems."

Mabel Worthington, Temple University: "at work on dissertation for Columbia - "Don Juan in the nineteenth century."

J. Korg, English Dept., CCNY (23rd and Lexington Ave., New York City): "Possible future project: Surrealism and Psychoanalysis."

Adolf Leschnitzer, College of the City of New York: "Origin of the Goethe Myth."

John Weigel, Associate Prof., Miami Univ., Oxford, Ohio: "Measurement of Personality in Literature."

Erwin R. Steinberg, Associate Prof., English, Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, Pa.: "The stream of consciousness technique in the modern novel (with particular reference to James Joyce)"

Harry Slochower, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY: "Mythic Patterns in Selected Literary Classics."

Leonard Manheim, City College of New York: "Hawthorne's Guilt".

Eleanor Nicholes, New York City: "Popularizing, in early nineteenth century, of theories and knowledge of irrational states - the breaking down of English hostility to the insane." (article)

Bibliography (V)

We expect to have help in searching the files of literary and scientific periodicals; we also welcome bibliographical listings which are extended to a critical commentary. The following was submitted by Professor William J. Griffin:

O. Hobart Mowrer, "The Life and Work of Edgar Allen Poe - A Study in Conscience-Killing," Chapter 22 in Learning Theory and Personality Dynamics. New York: Ronald Press, 1950. pp. 617-670.

Professor Mowrer reviews the interpretations of Poe's work by Napoleon, Basler, and Krutch, and adds an explanation of his own readings. He agrees that in both poetry and prose, Poe expresses psychic reality. He finds, however, that the significantly (compulsively?) recurrent motif in Poe's work is the symbolic representation of anxiety resulting from the repression of the superego. Professor Mowrer gently stands on its head the notion that neurosis is always traceable to suppression of "natural desires," finding justification in "William Wilson," "The Black Cat," "The Raven," and "Ligeia." He writes with moderation, but also with conviction.

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